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France Set to Press Iran On Hostages in Lebanon

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PARIS, April 19 — The French Government is ready to put pressure on Iran, through increased arms sales to Iraq, if the Iranian Government does not help to secure the release of seven French hostages being held in Lebanon, according to officials here.

The officials said France was evolving a new strategy toward Iran intended to both improve the tense relations between the two nations and secure the release of the hostages.

Disclosure of the French strategy comes after the killing on Thursday of two Britons and an American held hostage in Lebanon.

The officials said the strategy included a willingness to make some conciliatory gestures toward Iran but also increased support of Iraq if Iran remains unresponsive to French pleas for the hostages' release.

Two senior French diplomats returned from Iran this week from a mission described as an effort to reduce tensions.

End of Arms Sales Demanded

Tensions have been caused by a host of issues, but chief among them is French support for Iraq in the five-year-old war in the Persian Gulf.

Since the conservative Government, led by Prime Minister Jacques Chirac, came to power here a month ago, contacts with Iran have dramatically increased. Officials say the French have expressed a willingness to meet some of Iran's demands, including the repayment of a \$1.3 billion loan made to France in 1975 by the Shah of Iran for the construction of a nuclear reprocessing plant in France.

But officials close to Mr. Chirac have said the French policy includes a warning to Iran that arms shipments to Iraq will be sharply increased if Iran fails, following an improvement of relations with France, to use its influence to get the French hostages released.

"We are reversing the blackmail," a member of Mr. Chirac's circle said.

He said the French strategy included the threat that France would work to improve Iraq's war-making ability against Iran if the regime of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini did not secure the hostages release.

"We believe that the Iranians have decisive influence over the groups holding our hostages," the official said.

At least seven French citizens are being held hostage in Lebanon by pro-Iranian groups. The extremist groups announced in March that they had killed another hostage, Michel Seurat, in retaliation for the expulsion to Iraq of two pro-Iranian Iraqi dissidents, but Mr. Seurat's body has never been recovered and there are still hopes here that he may still be alive.

The groups holding the hostages, working through Arab intermediaries, have demanded that France end its military support of Iraq in the Persian Gulf war. They have also demanded the release of the five members of a Lebanese commando team, led by Anis Naccache, that tried unsuccessfully to kill a former Iranian Prime Minister, Shahpur Bakhtiar, in Paris in 1980.

The effort to secure the release of the hostages was a major preoccupation of the Socialist Government, which lost in legislative elections last month. Mr. Chirac, the new Prime Minister, announced that the hostages' release would be a priority of his Government.

But conservative officials have said that they would fundamentally change the approach taken by the Socialists

and that they would stress counter-measures against terrorists, including a greater reliance on covert actions.

The United States, with five hostages in Lebanon, has refused all negotiations aimed at their release, making its policy different from that of both the French Socialists and conservatives.

French officials and foreign diplomats here have said that in January the Socialist Government agreed to release one member of the Bakhtiar commando team, Mr. Naccache, in exchange for the release of four French hostages being held there. But the deal fell through, apparently because the groups holding the hostages increased their demands at the last minute.

Since then, Mr. Seurat was reported

killed and four more Frenchmen, the members of a television crew, were seized in Beirut.

Conservative officials have said they will not offer to exchange prisoners held in France for the release of the French hostages.

But in renewed diplomatic contacts with Iran, they have indicated that they would agree to make some concessions to Iran, including the return of the loan made by the Shah.

French officials have also said they might agree to restricting the activities of some Iranian dissidents living in France, including Massoud Radjavi, the leader of the People's Mujahedeen, a dissident group that says it is waging guerrilla war against the Khomeini Government in Iran.